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SUBJECT: BELGIAN PM VAN ROMPUY HARD TO REPLACE IF HE
BECOMES EU PRESIDENT

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11. (U) Summary: The Belgian media and academics believe PM Herman Van Rompuy is the most likely candidate for EU President. Van Rompuy has been a consensus-builder during his year in the Prime Minister's office and throughout his political career of more than 35 years. Van Rompuy shares a deep commitment to the European Union that is inherent to all Belgian politicians; as a founding member state of the European Coal and Steel Community and the EU, Belgium believes strongly in the EU and sees itself as a part of a European political family. Should Van Rompuy be selected as EU President, choosing a new Prime Minister could be a contentious task. Van Rompuy's Flemish Christian Democratic (CD&V) Party has said former PM and current FM Yves Leterme would be the most obvious successor, though he is unpopular in Francophone Belgium and with some in his own party. A return of former PM Jean-Luc Dehaene from retirement is a less likely option. Whoever is found to take Van Rompuy's place would lead the GOB through the Belgian EU presidency (July 1 to December 31, 2010) and until new elections are held in the first half of 2011. End Summary.

Van Rompuy as EU President

12. (SBU) The Belgian press has speculated over the last week that current PM Herman Van Rompuy would be selected by European leaders as the first President of the Council of the European Union. Both the Flemish and French speaking media argue that a politician from one of the smaller members of the original six founding countries of the EU (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) would be the best candidate. A knowledgeable academic contact views Van Rompuy as the only non-controversial choice among the contenders. If the EU picks Van Rompuy, it will be taking a politician whose local reputation is as a low key consensus builder in a country known for its difficult regional and linguistic divisions -- not an insignificant resume item for a future EU President. However, there is not yet EU-wide consensus on Van Rompuy, and some member states bristle at the idea of simply validating what they see as France and Germany's choice.

Leterme or Anyone But Leterme?

¶3. (SBU) If Van Rompuy is appointed EU President, the search will be on to find a successor to him as Prime Minister. According to a contact within the CD&V, the party's leadership has already endorsed former Prime Minister and current Foreign Minister Yves Leterme as Van Rompuy's replacement. The same contact also acknowledged there was some concern among party regulars with that decision. A keen academic observer of Belgian politics recently told Poloff that many members of the political class in Brussels are worried about another Leterme Prime Ministership. That contact noted that even within the CD&V, "the party of government," there were not many who favored Leterme's move from the MFA back to the PM's office. Leterme's first government took seven months to form and fell within a year. The second Leterme government fell when Leterme resigned in December 2008 due to allegations that he interfered in a major judicial decision related to the sale of Belgium's largest bank Fortis to the French bank BNP Paribas. Leterme is not particularly well liked by the Francophone parties and comes from the pro-Flanders wing of the CD&V.

¶4. (SBU) Still, among other CD&V senior leaders, the current party, Chairman Marianne Thyssens, is not considered a contender. Current Flemish Minister-President Kris Peeters is a rising star within the party, but just won his second election to a full four-year term, and likely would not view appointment to the remaining year or 18 months before elections must be held in 2011 to be appealing. Asking former PM Dehaene to return from retirement for a year is another possibility, but only if the CD&V's coalition partners decide to oppose a third Leterme government. Outside the CD&V, the Francophone Liberal MR and Flemish Liberal Open VLD together hold 41 seats in Parliament. The

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MR leader, Didier Reynders, is the only plausible Francophone PM, according to academic contacts and the press. However, he would have difficulty gathering support from the other Francophone party leaders in advance of the election. The Open VLD party is in shambles and has no contender for PM.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) If Van Rompuy were offered the Presidency of the EU Council, it might be too important a post for him to refuse, but the move would carry some risks for Belgium. Belgium holds the rotating EU Presidency during the second half of 2010 and as such will play a major role in putting the Lisbon treaty into practice. Though a Belgian at the helm of the EU Council during that time would reward Belgium's reputation as a solid member of the European Union, it would also place the spotlight on Belgium's contentious internal politics. Herman Van Rompuy has ably led the Belgian government for the past year and dealt well with the squabbling that sometimes erupts between Belgium's language regions and parties. Some observers in Brussels suggest Van Rompuy may turn down the EU Presidency if offered, because of his dedication to his country. That would also signal that Van Rompuy himself has doubts about a possible third Leterme government.

BIO

¶6. (SBU) A Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V), Herman Van Rompuy became Prime Minister of Belgium on December 29, 2008, when the King asked him to form a government after the resignation of then PM Yves Leterme. Van Rompuy developed a reputation as a consensus builder palatable to both Flemings and Francophones throughout his over thirty-five years in politics, strongly supporting the unity of the Belgian state. He has grown in public esteem since his appointment, based on his comparatively smooth management of Belgium's often contentious body politic. Van Rompuy served as President of the Chamber of Deputies from 2007 to 2008. He received the

honorary title of Minister of State in 2004. He has been elected to the Belgian Chamber of Deputies on the CD&V list in every election since 1995. He served as Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Budget from September 1993 to July 1999; he earned respect for drastically reducing Belgium's public debt during this period. From September 1988 to September 1995 he was the National Party Chairman for the Christian People's Party (CVP), the forerunner of the CD&V. He briefly held the post of State Secretary for Finance and Small and Medium Enterprise from May to September 1988. He was a CVP senator from 1988 to 1995. From 1982 to 1988 he was the CVP Chairman for the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral arrondissement, a politically important region to both the Francophones and the Flemings, which includes the Brussels region, and a mix of majority French and Dutch speaking suburbs in the Flemish region surrounding the city. He first became a member of the CVP's national bureau in 1978, and served as the National Chairman of the CVP Youth from 1973 to 1977. During his political career, he has served as a C on October

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31, 1947. He is married to Geertrui Wendels. The couple has four children: Peter (1980), Laura (1981), Elke (1983), and Thomas (1986). They have a grandson named Lander (2008).

GUTMAN

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